

Kazim Ali

From *The Book of Miriam the Prophetess*

1. THE PRAYER AT THE RIVER BANK

this hand made hard by work & slavery has never
yet turned against its own blood. this hand though
chattel has never murdered. here at the edge
of the river ankles choked with water-reeds &
eyes burning thirteen I am

dripping with my first blood & now
my first murder.

in the name of my blood
dropping to the river-bank & in the name of blood

let this small basket of my brother sink like a stone
and the deep rush him to death quickly

let Miriam the slave-daughter of Hebrews walk
from this cold sacrifice into freedom.

let even the waves part to make way for us.

and oh dear Nameless One let never again in the history of the world
a slave woman be at odds with the tide.

oh One of rushing water
let never again in the history of slave-women
the ocean swallow up our babies.

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2. THE PLAGUES

bat toothed & locust winged the pyramids remember
Joseph's dream. seven years abundance. seven
years famine.

seven times seven of wandering under the empty sky.

something's always falling out of the sky:

cockroaches hitting the stones like coconuts.
frogs slapping down with quiet burps. manna & quail for heaven's sake.

well,

I wait for the time our savior might rise up out of the good ground.

when the bush won't burn. when the river won't bleed.

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3.THE RIVER TURNS RED

I had hoped to terrify
by our fierce & dreadful
miracles.

but my brother turned the river red &
the Queen's face flowered.

she leaned over & hissed
in the *Firaun's* ear:

there.
now your quarrel with the Hebrew God is over.

let these people go.
even the Goddess of the Nile is giving you her Sacred sign.

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4. HE CAME DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN

I will take the stones in my small strong hands.

When I hear my brother stammer out those words.

I will try and try and try
to forget:

it was *Firaun* who first
said to us:

*he that shall not live
by the law*

*shall die
by the law.*

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5. THE LAMENT OF MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS

while he was on the mountain receiving God's ear
I was on the ground sweating in my toe-length robe,
the stretch of burlap & the back of my neck wet.

while he put aside his sandals to walk on sacred ground
I walked in mine through manure to pen the animals. smelling
like one. soothing thousands of anxious wanderers
who left their slave-homes to come where? here?

the holy desert of wandering?

& when he stood up & called manna down from the sky
I kneaded dough. for hours. to bake bread.
when he brought the quail I tore off the feathers. chopped
off each head. squeezed the neck with my fist. draining the blood.

he was so far away at the head of the column. he never
seemed to notice we were getting older. dying. I cleaned each
body. shaved their heads. clipped their nails. shrouded
them in sheets. & covered them gently in sand.

those who came after might look at the mounds & know that Israel
came this way. that Miriam lived. that under each sand dune
was a forgotten Hebrew who stumbled towards her last end wanting
only such a small thing before her quiet death:

to hear God whispering in her own ears the quick way home.

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6. THE PROMISE

this land is your Promise to the sky
which gave bread that you might
live. on this place build a temple.
where exile will end & every wanderer
comes home.

let even Cain and all the condemned
come home. let even Hagar &
Ishmael come home.

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7. IN HER OLD AGE MIRIAM REMEMBERS THE LAST PLAGUE

oh *Firaun*. after all these years lay your hand aside
and quiet the old curses caught in your throat.
you should have held your son in his last minutes.

there was no helping it.

though I tell you now it was everything I could do to stay put
in my dark house.

Moses and Aaron held me down, binding my arms
while I sat on the floor of the kitchen screaming
as I heard your screams.

every night I have prayed for forgiveness from the God
of my people for if I had gotten free I would surely
have ruined everything, would have betrayed our nation,

I would have run out into the streets screaming warnings,

I would have painted lambs' blood over every Egyptian door.

even yours *Firaun*.

even yours.

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8. MIRIAM AND MOSES REFUSE TO ENTER TO PROMISED LAND

oh One of Water and No Water,

I have fulfilled my duty. & brought
them from that river which bled
to this one.

should they become
the destroyers of villages,
builders of Pyramids,
dispersers of nations,
let even the walls weep

when children of our house & Ishmael's rebuild Your house
when the river of baptisms runs clear of blood
then the Promise will be unbroken &

I & my weary brother will enter.